

Language Contact: Impact of Arabic Language on African and Indian Languages

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Arabic is an international language and the language of the Holy Qur'an. It has influenced many languages around the world, including Persian, Kurdish, Hindi, Urdu, Kashmiri, Bengali, Punjabi, Tamil, and Malayalam. This influence primarily spread through the Muslim community, as Arabic served as their religious and cultural language and as the language of business, facilitating interaction with speakers of other languages. This language contact resulted in many Arabic loan words, similarity in the shapes of letters, grammar and even language structure too. The continuous cultural and linguistic interactions have also led to the development of new Arabic-regional languages and literary works in some places across the world. This article tries to analyse the impact of Arabic language on Indian and African languages.

Keywords: Language contact, loanwords, Contact Linguistics, cultural exchange, adoption.

Introduction

Arabic is one of the most important languages among the Semitic languages. With the spread of Islam, the Arabic language also developed and crossed boundaries. Arabic had a significant impact on world languages, particularly on Indian and African languages, through loanwords, adopted language features, the translation of literary

works, and the creation of new language styles. This influence resulted from historical factors such as trade relations, conquest, and cultural exchange.

India and Africa are the hotbeds of linguistic diversity. During the Mughal Empire, the Persian language was the official language of the dynasty, while the Arabic language served as the religious language. This led to the introduction of many Arabic loanwords into Indian languages through Persian. The travel of Arab traders along the African coast and the association with the local inhabitants led to Arabic influence in the eastern and western parts of the African continents. In the modern era, social media platforms play an important role in facilitating language contact.

Language Contact and Forms of Influence

Language contact refers to the interaction between languages and their mutual influence on each other. Language contact occurs when two or more languages interact. The study of language contact is known as Contact Linguistics. When speakers of different languages interact closely, their languages influence each other and grow in an environment of linguistic and cultural exchange. This contact commonly occurs among people living at the borders of states and nations, as well as due to migration for education, employment, business, tourism and trade. The widespread use of smartphones, television, news channels and social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter also facilitate language contact.

Speakers of a language interact directly with neighbouring societies and with people from all over the world through social and communicative media, leading to linguistic influence. The main forms of influence include vocabulary borrowing, adoption of language features, and development of new language styles. Interaction between speakers of different languages may also lead to cultural influences, as seen in borrowed terms like “T-shirt” and “jeans.”

A Brief History of Arabic Language

Arabic is one of the most important languages among the Semitic languages, which include Phoenician, Assyrian, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Arabic. It is written in the Arabic alphabet, known as the ‘Abjad Script’, and is read from right to left.

The earliest Arabic inscriptions date back to 512-568 BC, according to the book 'Histories' by Herodotus. The Hasaeen inscription from Eastern Saudi Arabia in the 4th century BC also indicates the presence of the Arabic language. After the 6th century AD, When the Islamic empire expanded rapidly in the Arab world, other Middle Eastern countries, Persia and Spain, Arabic spread as a language of administration and communication all over there and eventually into Africa, Europe and other parts of the world.

Arabic is spoken by as many as 422 million speakers, native and non-native in the Arab world. It is one of the half-dozen most popular languages in the world and is recognized by the United Nations. December 18 is celebrated as the world Arabic language day.

Dr. Rushdi Ahmad said: "Arabic is a container of wide-ranging, deep impact and long history of civilization. It conveyed to humanity at a certain period the foundations of civilization and the factors of progress in all natural sciences, mathematics, medicine, astronomy and music."

Arabic Impact on African Languages

The history of languages tells a story of mutual exchange. The simplest form of influence among languages is lexical borrowing. Arabic has borrowed many words from various languages, including Hebrew, Greek, Persian, Syriac, Turkish, English, and French. At the same time, Arabic contributed several vocabularies to numerous languages such as English, Persian and Hindi. Many words have been acquired either directly from Arabic or indirectly passing from Arabic into other languages like Persian, Latin, French and then to English. The English words such as 'admiral', 'sukar', 'syrap' are derived from Arabic.

Africa is a land of around 2000 varieties of languages. Afro-Asiatic family (Arabic, Amharic, Hausa, Somali languages, etc.), Niger-Congo family (Swahili, Zulu, Yoruba languages, etc.), Nilo-Saharan family (Kanuri and Luo languages) and Khoisan family (Kung and Nama languages) are the four main primary language families in the African continent.

The Arab traders who engaged in gold and ivory trading, settled in the coastal region of Africa from the 7th century, and mingled the native people and exchanged their religion, culture and language among them. Arabic news channels and cultural shows played an important role in language contact between Arabic and African languages.

As a result of language contact, Arabic also influenced the African languages in its vocabularies, shapes of letters, sounds and language structure, particularly in the northern and western parts of the African continent such as Swahili, Yoruba, Oromo, Amharic and Hausa. The name ‘Swahili’ was derived from the Arabic word ‘sahil’ (sea shore). The Arab traders travelled to the coastal areas of Africa and stayed in communication with the people there. Swahili language is spoken in the region of Kenya, Tansania, Zanzibar, Uganda, Somalia, Burundi, Mozambique, Zambia, Malawi and Congo. Arabic deeply influenced the Swahili providing it civilized terms and terminology, modified structure and representing written style.

Arabic Impact on Swahili Language

Swahili is a spoken language of millions of people in East Africa. The emergence of Swahili language occurred as a result of the incorporation of Arabic language into local Bantu languages. Arabic language influenced Swahili through borrowed vocabularies, grammar, script and phonetics. It also adopted some pluralization patterns and sounds of Arabic. Arabic script was mainly used for writing Swahili language until the Latin script was introduced in the 19th century.

Arabic Loanwords in Swahili Language

As Arabic is a language of Qur’an and Hadith, the Muslim community in Africa used many Arabic words in religious practices and rituals even while speaking their native language and it caused the entry of many Arabic vocabularies in their own language. For example:

Arabic word	Swahili	Meaning
سفر	safari	travel
رئيس	Ra’is	president
ستة	Sita	six

سبعة	Sab'a	seven
تسعة	Tis'a	nine
عاقبة	Afiya	helth
فائدة	Fa'ida	profit
خسارة	Hasara	loss
حالة	Halati	maternal aunt
عم	Ami	uncle
سياسة	Siyasa	politics
دولة	Dola	state
لغة	Luga	language
صابون	Swabun	soap
رأسمال	Rasilimali	capital
أمن	Amani	peace

Arabic Loanwords in Hausa Language

Hausa is one of the largest African languages in West Africa. It is the official language of Nigeria and Niger. 'Ajami script' is the modified form of Arabic script used for writing Hausa language till the 20th century. Many Arabic words are used in Hausa language in the same sense or with a slight difference of meaning in different areas like religion, administration and law. For example:

Arabic Word	Meaning	Hausa Word	Meaning
التاجر	Merchant	Thajir	Rich Person
الطمع	Greed	Thammaha	Expectation
دولة	Dynasty	Dola	Dynasty
حرب	War	Harb	Shoot
فصاحة	Eloquence	Fasaha	Arts

Arabic Loanwords in Indian Languages

India is a land of multiple languages. It is a multilingual country with over 700 spoken languages belonging to various language families like Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austroasiatic, Sino-Tibetan and Tai-Kadai language families. As the Indian Ocean is a trade route to different parts of the world, Arabic language expanded in the Indian subcontinent.

At the same time, Arabic has significantly influenced many Asian languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Persian, Kurdish, Turkish, Hindi, Malayalam, Indonesian, Punjabi and Malay.

Arabic Loanwords in Hindi:

Hindi is the standardized variety of the Hindustani language, written in the Devanagari script. It is the official language of the Government of India and the native language of most people living in nine states, including Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Bihar, as well as three union territories, such as Delhi. It is one of the 22 scheduled languages of India.

Hindi has borrowed many words from other languages, including Persian, Hebrew, and others. Arabic and Hindi cultures have interacted through religious practices, travel, and trade over the centuries. Traditions such as the use of henna in wedding ceremonies also reflect this cultural exchange and many Arabic words have entered the Hindi language. For example:

Arabic-Hindi Common word	Meaning	Arabic-Hindi Common word	Meaning
waqth وقت	Time	Thareekh تاریخ	Date
Muskil مشکل	Problem	Kursiyya کرسی	Chair
Lakin لکن	But	Qanoon قانون	Law
Ishq عشق	Love	Qalam قلم	Pen
Qissa قصہ	Story	Mahabath محبہ	Love

Arabic Loanwords in Malayalam

Malayalam is a Dravidian language with official language status in Kerala. It is one of the 22 scheduled languages of India. Malayalam is spoken in the state of Kerala, the union territories of Lakshadweep and Puducherry, and by Malayalees worldwide, especially in the Persian Gulf countries.

A significant number of Malayalam words have originated from Sanskrit and Tamil. Due to the interaction between the native people of Kerala and the Arab world's trading power, the Arabic language contributed many vocabularies to the Malayalam language, such as:

Arabic-Malayalm Common word	Meaning	Arabic-Malayalam Common word	Meanin
Maithan ميدان	Playground	Khalas خلاص	Enough
Tarjama ترجمة	Translation	Bakki باقي	Remaining
Kathth خط	Letter	Halva حلوى	Sweet
Vakkeel وكيل	Advocate	Dunya دنيا	Wold
Qissa قصة	Story	Mahabath محنة	Love

Arabic Loanwords in Urdu

The Urdu language is thought to have originated from Arabic, but it actually belongs to the Indo-European language family, while Arabic is part of the Afro-Asiatic language family. Even so, Urdu can be considered a hybrid product of Persian, Hindi, and Arabic languages. Many words have been borrowed from other languages, especially from Arabic.

Arabic-Urdu Common word	Meaning	Arabic-Urdu Common word	Meanin
hikmath حكمة	Wisdom	Badal بدل	Exchange
haya حياء	Shame	akhar آخر	last
adab آداب	Manners	bab باب	Door
insan إنسان	Human being	badr بدر	Full Moon

Impact of Arabic in Kashmiri Language

Kashmiri is an Indo-Aryan language. Kashmiri speakers are mainly concentrated in the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Jammu and Kashmir is the center of five countries, viz Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, China and India. The Kashmiri language has forty-five letters; many Arabic alphabets have been incorporated into the Kashmiri language. Arabic is taught in the Kashmir state as a subject in the primary, secondary and higher secondary schools and also as undergraduate, post graduate and PhD programmes.

So many common words are found in Arabic and Kashmiri languages. The Kashmiri Muslim community uses Arabic words related to their religious rituals and daily life. For example:

Arabic-Kashmiri Common word	Meaning	Arabic-Kashmiri Common word	Meaning
Ad'an أذان	Call for prayer	Aj'r أجر	Reward
Eeman إيمان	Belief	Thilavath تلاوة	Recitation
Masjid مسجد	Mosque	Gus'l غسل	Bath
Rak'ath ركعة	Part of Prayer	Ahmaq أحمق	Foolish
Humkoomath حكومة	Government	Vazeer وزير	Minister
Tharbiyath تربیة	Education	Swihhath صحة	Health
Tharjamath ترجمة	Translation	Mara'd مرض	Disease
Kafir كافر	Non Believer	Hararath حرارة	Temperature
Jannath جنة	Heaven	Rahath راحة	Relief
Rahmath رحمة	Mercy	Thwalib طالب	Student

Adoption of Language Features

Alongside loanwords, the adoption of language features from older languages is common among the majority of languages. Some languages, such as Persian, Kurdish, Turkish, Swahili, Amharic, Hausa, and Urdu have adopted Arabic language features, including the writing system (from right to left) and certain grammatical structures. The Perso-Arabic script (Nastaliq/Nastaleeq) is used in Kashmiri, Punjabi, and especially in the Urdu language.

Creation of New Language System

As a result of trade relations between Arabs and India, when the Arabs began to settle in different regions of India, they started to write regional languages using Arabic scripts with some additional letters. This led to the creation of new language systems like Arabi-Malayalam and Arabic-Tamil. These systems originated for practical purposes, such as Qur'an recitation, learning Islamic Sharia in the Madrasa movement, and for commercial purposes.

Arabi-Malayalam

Malayalam has been written in other scripts such as Latin, Syriac, and Arabic. While Suriyani Malayalam was used by Saint Thomas Christians until the 19th century, Arabi-Malayalam is still used by Muslims, particularly in the Malabar region. It is a system of writing Malayalam in the Arabic script and originated in the south Indian region of Malabar, being widely used in the Madrasa movement in Kerala and Lakshadweep. It is still used as a medium of education in the syllabus of Samastha Kerala Islam Matha Vidyabhyasa Board and Samastha Kerala Sunni Vidyabhyasa Board. It was an essential part of the Malabar Mappila life.

Malayalam has 53 letters while Arabic has only 28 letters. It was overcome by creating additional letters. For example: The additional letters not found in the Arabic Alphabet such as pa, gha, dha, ra, la, cha are formed by combining dots or lines into the similar letters.

The first Arabi-Malayalam novel, 'Chahar Darvesh', a translation of a Persian work, was published in 1883, six years before O. Chandumenon's novel 'Indulekha'

The Mappila literature includes various genres such as Padappattu (war songs), Malappattu (praise songs), Kathupattu (narrative songs), and Pakshippattu (bird songs), and all of them were written in Arabi-Malayalam. Moyinkutty Vaidyar, known as the ‘Mappila Maha Kavi’ (Great Poet of the Mappilas), was a significant influence on this literary style. Among the most famous works in Arabi-Malayalam is Muhyuddeen Mala, authored by Qasi Muhammad.

Arabi-Tamil (Arwi Language)

Arab culture had a significant impact on the Tamil people, particularly as cities like Colombo and Trincomalee served as port routes for trade between the Middle East and Southern Asia. Islamic religion practiced by many Tamils and Muslim communities have contributed to Tamil culture. This influence led to the development of an Arabicized script for writing Tamil, known as Arwi.

Arwi is a written language style that represents the Tamil alphabet in the Arabic script, incorporating additional letters. It serves as a bridge language system for Tamil Muslims to learn Arabic, particularly for reading the Qur’an and engaging with Arabic literary works.

The Arwi alphabet consists of 13 additional letters alongside the 26 Arabic alphabet characters to accommodate Tamil vowels such as ‘e’ and ‘o’, as well as several Tamil consonants that do not have equivalent sounds in Arabic.

Literary Tradition

Between the 8th and 13th centuries, the Middle East was a centre of growth in science, philosophy, and literature. During this Golden Age, numerous books were published in Arabic in various branches of science such as medicine, chemistry, and astronomy, as well as in prose and poetry literature. Notable figures from this period include Al-Khwarizmi, Jabir ibn Hayyan, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and Abdullah ibn al-Muqaffa.

Many of these works were translated into Indian languages and were extensively studied. Conversely, ancient Indian texts in science and literature were translated from Sanskrit to Arabic. For

example, Al-Biruni (d. 1048) translated several Sanskrit works, including the Bhagavad Gita, into Arabic.

This cultural and intellectual exchange led to the introduction of Arabic terms and vocabularies into Indian languages. Moreover, the Arabic poetic form ‘Ghazal’ gained popularity in Persian, Hindi, and Urdu languages, leaving a lasting impact on South Asian literary traditions.

Conclusion

The Arabic language left a lasting influence on Indian languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Malayalam, and African languages such as Swahili, Hausa and Amharic languages through loanwords, adoption of script, formation of new language styles, and translation movements. It also impacted regional culture in India and Africa, particularly through religious and geographical terms like Zakat (charity), Hajj (pilgrimage), Jabal Tariq (Gibraltar), Sahara (desert), and Jihad (struggle). In this age of social media, the terms of food items and names of clothes in Arabic such as ‘Majboos’, ‘Kabsa’, ‘Kurta’ were positioned in different languages.

The Muslim communities of both countries are the vehicle of religious and cultural transmission. The Arabic language influenced many languages in India such as Bengali, Punjabi, Gujarati, etc. and in Africa such as Yoruba and Zulu.

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